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# The Workshop

A Monthly Journal, devoted to Progress of the Useful Arts

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## THE WOODWORK OF THE RENAISSANCE.

BY MR. JOSEPH DURM, Archt.

With Illustrations from original drawings.

In no other branch of the Art-Industry of the Renaissance does the decorative element, which characterizes the art-creations of this epoch, and which is so full of grace and charm, stand out so pleasingly, and show such important results, as in those very productions which, although formed of the most unpretending material, viz., wood, reach the very height of perfection of which this style of work is capable; some of them remaining for ever models of classical taste and elegance. This opinion has been and is confirmed by the productions of nearly the whole of modern cabinet-work; for with the exception of a few capricious and extraordinary imitations of mediæval style, which have made their appearance from time to time, this branch of Art-Industry lives, even to this day, entirely on those creations, treating them with a greater or less degree of skill and success.

We get now either mere reproductions, blameless enough indeed, or we find, tho' rarely, something still more highly worked up in the style of the great masters of the Cinque-cento, or, and this, alas, is most frequently the case, misunderstood types, worn out, used up, "flat, stale and unprofitable".

The last Paris exhibition afforded an excellent general view of the productions in this department of Art-Industry, and at the same time a full confirmation of the opinion stated above. With a due estimation of our modern views and necessities, which have some title to put in a word on the style and form of our productions of the Useful Arts, a too slavish adherence to the epoch selected was, with much tact, avoided. To the honor of Art-Industry at large it must be said that there was a

greater harmony and agreement among all nations with regard to style in this than in High Art, and that the influence of the Renaissance has penetrated everywhere.

Some productions of French artists were perfect gems, and may vie with the best creations of the best time.

What is most needed in the art-workers and manufacturers is in the first place a true understanding of style and conventional treatment. The extreme want of these accomplishments, together with the antiquarian or archæological sham-productions in which artists and public liked hitherto to indulge, has led to a great confusion in matters of art in general, and to a misappreciation and misapplication of ornamental and decorative features.

The history of art is often reflected in one single object, Gothic in its beginning, Rococo in its termination, or vice versa; others are reduced into a barren naturalism, knotty branches with or without foliage forming frames, and a wood-box looking like a real pile of wood, and other objects of the same kind. The cause of this perverted application of ornament is to be sought in the course of instruction, prevalent in the generality of the schools of art, in which the pupils usually copy only fragments of ornament, the greatest importance being attached to an artistic treatment, without directing the attention to the relation which the fragment bears to the whole from which it is taken, or to the functions which it performs.

This confusion in relation to style we must endeavour by all means to repress, and place a barrier against it by a deep and thorough study, not only on historical, but technical grounds; that is, we must bring into account

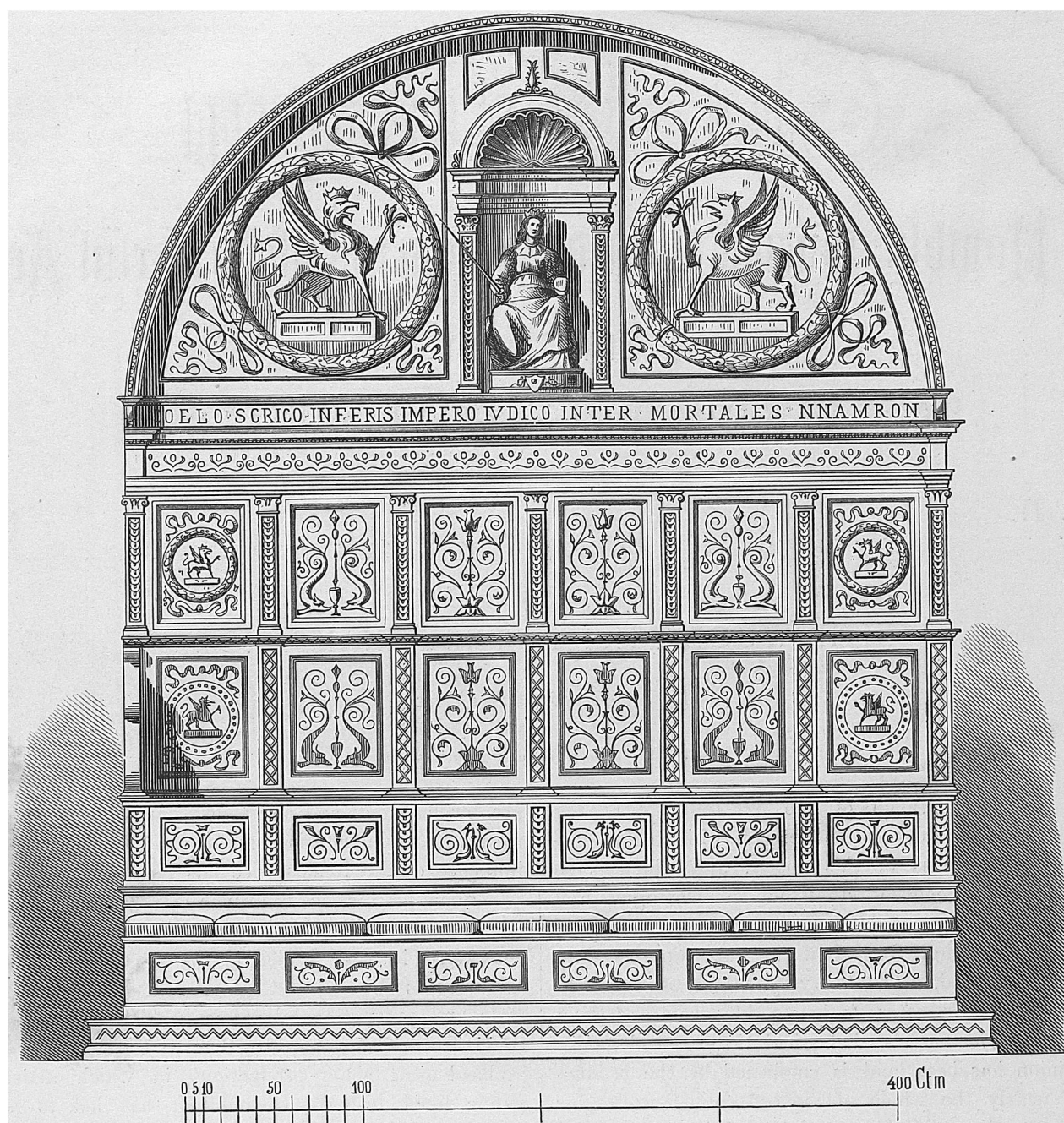


Fig. 1.

the peculiarities of the material which we use in our art-productions, and profit by the knowledge of its advantages and disadvantages in connection with art.

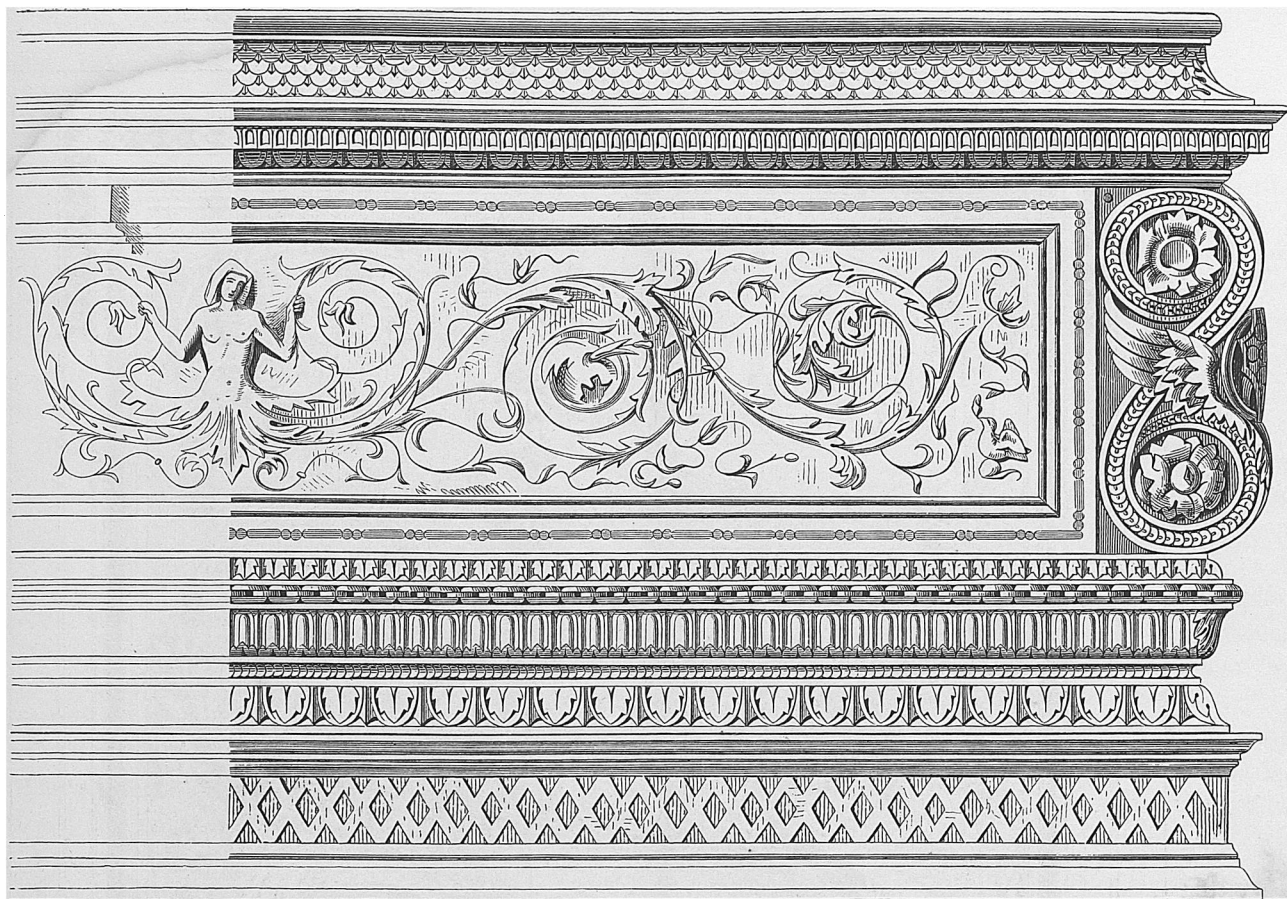
An interest in the study of style in art must be awakened by public exhibition of master-pieces of all times, from the frequent observation of which the taste and sound sense of the public would speedily demand similar things, i. e. excellence in general for every kind of household furniture; the art-workmen would be obliged to exert themselves and to study to meet the requirements of the public; and where the interest is generally excited, the comprehension will soon follow and with it the respect for the artist and his work.

Again; we desire before all things to cultivate a popular taste, but in the practical manner which we have pointed out. Any amelioration in relation to Art must proceed from and develop itself from the people. It is not alone the artists who are to blame for their

unfortunate productions; too often they are compelled by external circumstances to pay homage to a corrupt taste, because objects of a certain shape, when in fashion, are easily saleable, while the better productions of the craft often become mere drugs in the market.

But let us return to our more especial subject; the peculiarities of the material of which we are treating are, first of all, its hygrometric properties, and then its almost stereotomic ductility.

The defects, as well as the advantages of the material must be taken into consideration in our compositions; if, e. g., the stout wood, the surface of which is to be ornamented, splits easily length-ways, the ornament must take the direction of the fibres, that the flaws which may occur may not detract from the nicety of the design; and as broad planks are most liable to split and warp, comparatively small ones should be preferred.

Fig. 2.  $\frac{1}{10}$ .

In the compositions of the Renaissance period we find all these peculiarities taken into account, and everything that can impair the solidity of the object avoided with great care and intelligence.

The means of giving the required form to the wood were rather limited, cutting with the saw, plane, or knife, and filing, boring, and turning being the only processes available. The artificial bending of the wood by steam, the wood-pulp, the *bois durci* was not yet discovered. With the latter an appropriate treatment of the wood in its peculiar style is out of the question, since by its entire transformation it can receive any form whatever, even one which may be quite opposed to the peculiar properties of wood.

The surface decoration of the wood is either relief work, carved in every style from the flattest to the boldest and most prominent treatment, or marquetry (*tarsia*), i. e., flat inlaid work, or also variegated painting. This last was afterwards almost wholly superseded by marquetry, and appears at last only in a few gilded, ornamented mouldings, or on very small spaces.

The introduction of marquetry is doubtless owing to its great durability, in opposition to the too easily injured and perishable painting, especially in objects intended for daily use.

This exchange will be duly appreciated, when we see how the *tarsia* work is treated, the tenderest shades of color, from the lightest yellow to the darkest brown and even black, being blended with great intelligence and skill, while the pictorial effect is admirably preserved,

and historical compositions, landscapes, simple vessels, interlaced bands, and vegetable ornaments are handled with similar grace, and shaped in a masterly and most skilful manner.

The finest specimens of this kind are shown in the marquetry of the stalls in S. Maria maggiore at Bergamo by Giov. Franc. Capo Ferrato. Monks and simple artisans of Lombardy were the originators of the cabinet work of the Renaissance in Italy; they attracted high consideration for their art both in their own country and far beyond its limits, and showed to what height the productive power and genius in art of a people may rise in a healthy period without any æsthetic lectures or the tutorage of artistic doctrines. But also the most eminent artists of the epoch did not disdain doing their very best by trying their skill on the creations of the Useful Arts, Peruzzi, Giuliano and Benedetto da Majano being frequently engaged in their active promotion. The excellence of their composition and execution in this province of art is a witness and the best proof of the ardour with which they applied to this work. At a later date, Belgian and German masters of the Renaissance gained no less reputation in this branch of Art-Industry, and being likewise first rate artists, produced most excellent specimens of their art.

Generally the carved borders of the surfaces either represent some architectural design or boldly executed figures of men and beasts, chimeras, and vegetable ornaments in high perfection, both of conception and workmanship. The architectural features, mouldings, cornices etc.,





Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

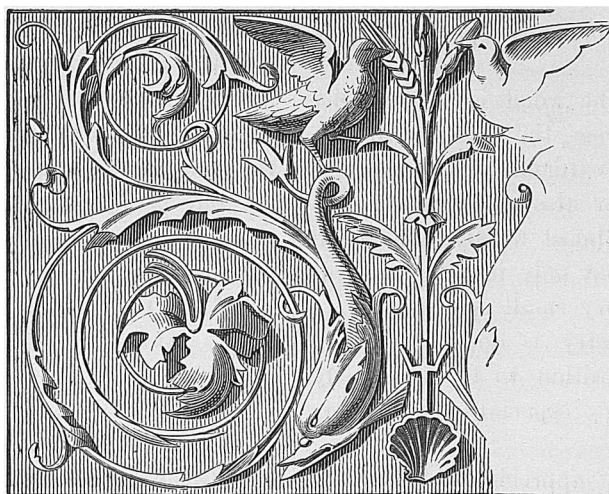


Fig. 5.

which bind, separate, encircle, or crown the structural parts are rather thin though strongly projecting as is fitting for woodwork. On account of the extreme ductility of the material the mouldings were in very few instances left quite plain, being adorned with the carvings of egg and tongue, beads, leaves, etc., and contributing not a little to raise the general impression of richness and elegance. Many of their compositions suffer from a certain exuberance, a mass of ornamental forms being exposed to view; but this reproach is more easy to be borne, than that uniform flatness of many modern productions, which, under the appearance of a so called simplicity, do not conceal a lamentable poverty of imagination.

The productions of Art-Industry in general which have any pretension to rise above the level of the merest common necessities must display a certain degree of ornamentation, if they are to please. But in many cases, by the want of skill in the workmen of the present day in this department of art, a cheap and good execution of the decorative parts of these productions becomes impossible. The carvings of Cambio in Perugia, (about 1500,) with the wood left in its natural color and but sparingly gilt, rank perhaps among the most beautiful and elegant creations of the kind. Relief-work, marquetry and richly ornamented mouldings vie with one another in their perfection. Behind the richly carved pulpit (fig. 2) the design of which is attributed to Perugino, above two graduated rows of seats executed in the noblest style, rises the mural decoration (fig. 1), following in its upper part the form of the vault covering the room.

The semi-circle is enlivened by a niche decorated with a statue, the spandrels right and left adorned by griffins (the supporters of the escutcheon of Siena) stan-

ding on money-chests. The crown, sword, ball, and drapery border of the little figure are gilt, as are also the fillets of the architectural mouldings framing the niche. The raking cornice crowning the semi-circle rests on two boldly projecting consoles, the soffit of the arch being divided into small sunk compartments in which gilt flowers are placed.

The panels between the pilasters under the entablature are richly and nobly ornamented and of excellent effect in their bold relief, the designs varying in the drawings given in figs. 3 and 4 and in the griffins encircled by fruit wreaths. The panels beneath these repeat the designs, but being intended as backs for the upper row of stalls they are not carved but decorated by marquetry.

The front of the upper row of stalls is adorned with reliefs of three different patterns, one of which is given in fig. 5; that of the lower row with marquetry.

The front of the pulpit is executed in the most exquisite manner; almost every profile is of the utmost elegance, and ornamented in the most perfect harmony with its proper functions. The panel is enriched with carving in bold relief while the bead-roll only which encloses the frame is of inlaid work.

The walls and vaulted roof of the comparatively small space in which all this exquisite specimen of Italian woodwork is displayed are covered with the noblest paintings by Pietro Perugino and his pupils, and thus an interior is provided, which has no where its equal in the harmonious effect and the perfection of its artistic execution; no magistracy in the whole world being so splendidly seated as the merchant judges of the capital of Umbria.